

## **Local accountability and the National Education Service**

Education is an essential public service that has a huge impact on the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of individuals, communities and nations. Those in charge of determining education policy and delivering it – at a national, local and institutional level – must be fully accountable to the people who are most affected by their decisions. The University and College Union (UCU) represents over 120,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK. UCU is pleased to make a submission to the Labour Party's National Policy Forum Consultation on local accountability, focussing on the post-16 sector.

In post-16 education the effects of marketisation, competition for funding and high stakes accountability regimes have taken the focus of education providers away from the needs of learners, families and communities – those who use education services and depend most upon them. Although institutions are autonomous, in reality the priorities of central government plus these other forces acting on them set parameters around that autonomy. The emphasis on competition between providers for learners and funding has reduced the incentive for education providers to work together collaboratively in the interests of local people and their local areas. The priorities of employers and the wider economy have come to dominate when the interests of a wider range of stakeholders must be brought back into education to ensure it works for the many, not the few.

Meanwhile a process of piecemeal devolution has led to an increasingly complex and variable system of local and regional accountability, making it harder for students, staff and communities to understand how they can shape education policy and hold decision-makers to account. Although the recent academies programme for schools has received a lot of attention for removing the accountability of schools to local authorities and thus parents and communities, the incorporation of FE colleges in the 1990s removed them wholesale from democratic accountability. Accountability should flow downwards yet the trend has been to centralise and place barriers between institutions and the communities they are rooted in.

The creation of a National Education Service by a Labour government will be a chance to reshape the accountability system in the UK, building on good practice and embedding the interests of students, staff, families and communities within accountability structures for an inclusive, responsive and supportive education system that enables participation for all.

## Current accountability in post-16 education

Since 1992 and the advent of incorporation, both the further and higher education sectors have been subject to market forces enforcing competition between colleges, schools and the HE sector. The creation of business focused governing bodies has cultivated a debased view of education as limited to meeting the demands of employers and has confused the needs of employers with the needs of employment.

In recent years, the market-based approach to post-16 education has been characterised by:

- **Increasing detachment of providers from the needs of learners and communities;** institutions have been encouraged to behave like businesses and incentivised to 'follow the money' rather than putting learners at the heart of decision-making. Governing bodies are increasingly dominated by employer interests, and there has been a shift towards meeting employer needs rather than ensuring a broad and balanced educational offer. The new insolvency regime for FE is a further step toward making educational institutions akin to businesses. UCU fundamentally opposes this conception of education – an institution should be at the heart of the community, providing for the diverse needs within it. It is not a business that can exit or enter the market at will. It must be a permanent fixture rooted in the community, providing support to all.
- **Creeping managerialism within institutions,** including the imposition of unhelpful, top-down accountability regimes like TEF, REF and Ofsted. These serve to increase stress and workload, undermine professional autonomy, and make it harder for staff and students to hold management to account.
- **Widespread use of unaccountable and exploitative employment models;** the post-16 workforce is blighted by insecure, precarious contracts. As UCU's **Counting the Costs of Casualisation report** has shown, there is a high personal cost to working in the post-16 sector – physical and mental health, financial stability and personal lives are negatively affected by working conditions. This is contributing to a recruitment and retention crisis in the sector, with existing staff paying the price for their commitment to their profession and their students.
- **A lack of transparency on senior pay and perks** in colleges and universities leading to many high-profile scandals and significant reputational damage for the sector. At the same time the workforce has seen falling pay and worsening conditions.
- **A narrowing curriculum and fewer learning opportunities** focussed on compliance with accountability regimes, funding streams or employer need with little input from those who deliver or study on the programmes; more stratification and inflexibility in learning pathways and diminishing places to learn, especially venues that host adult and community or informal learning.

These issues have been compounded by the chilling effect which the Trade Union Act's 50% turnout threshold is having on the ability of staff to bargain effectively on issues of

concern. All of this ultimately impacts upon the quality of education on offer and inhibits the transformative potential of education.

## **Principles of effective accountability in post-16 education**

### **Accountability at an institutional level**

The high stakes accountability regimes currently in place reinforce the centralised and marketised character of education. They create an exclusionary, stratified education system rather than one based on inclusion. The aims of education go far beyond the regime of targets, performance indicators and assessments that dominate current policy and practice. Performance benchmarks and standards should be a mix of national, regional and local elements reflecting the contexts and circumstances of the provider and learner; they should be clear, simple and understandable and entail a minimum of bureaucracy. Trade Unions should have a role in how accountability measures for staff are agreed with institutions so that they are fair, proportionate and not punitive.

Governing bodies must be held to account more effectively. They should be representative and required to elect student and staff representatives, including stakeholders from across the institution and local community to reflect the diverse constituencies they serve. Governors should have equal status regardless of the capacity in which they are on the board, i.e. staff and student representatives should not be excluded from discussions as our members report can happen where they currently exist.

Good governance underpins the ability of institutions to serve the needs of their students, local communities and wider society. It is also essential to the creation of an academic community in which the professionalism of staff is respected and their expert views heard. The 2016 Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act introduced a requirement for all higher education institutions to have staff and student representatives on their governing body, including nominations from trade unions. UCU believes there should be a similar legal requirement for education institutions across the UK.

### **Accountability at a local/regional level**

FE colleges should be recognised, funded, and supported as anchor institutions within their communities offering a rich, diverse and broad curriculum. Funding mechanisms should not place colleges in competition with one another and should be brought under democratic control. Teachers in colleges should have the status of highly trusted professionals, invested in as such by their employers.

When considering structures, the focus should be on ensuring simple, transparent means of democratic engagement and accountability which:

- Has at its core the understanding that education is a vital public service that should be properly resourced and democratically controlled
- Ensures that staff, students and local communities have a meaningful role in national, local and institutional decision-making processes and curriculum design
- Defends professional autonomy and academic freedom
- Promotes a model of quality assurance based on peer review

## **Accountability in a National Education Service**

We need to rethink what purpose accountability in education has. It isn't about box ticking to hit targets or secure funding, it is about giving those with a stake in the sector a voice. The introduction of the NES provides an opportunity to recognise the equal value to individuals and society of lifelong learning whether vocational or non-vocational, formal or informal learning. To enable changing lives and helping people reach their full potential. It is a chance to end the compulsion in post-16 education that leads to young people becoming alienated and disengaged. And it should bring to an end the pernicious effects of marketisation in our education system, returning democratic accountability to the students and communities it serves.

Allied to this is the need to properly fund our education system from cradle to grave. Education makes a huge difference to the most marginalised and in-need people in our society. UCU wants a genuinely inclusive education system that can be accessed by everyone – SEND learners, migrants, offenders, carers, pensioners, employed or unemployed – no group should be excluded from being able to learn. This requires joined up working across government so that other departments (health, justice, housing and communities, work and pensions etc.) work collaboratively to support one another with their complementary missions and services, rather than in silos as too often happens now.

Cross-sector forums - with representatives from trade unions, parent groups, students' unions, community leaders and employers – on a local, regional or sub-regional basis depending on local context - should be established to map the education and training needs of the community with inclusivity and equality of access at their heart. These would foster a collaborative environment for institutions to meet those needs. Based on the work of these forums, local area leaders should jointly plan, commission and provide education, health and care services in a way which improves outcomes for young people and disadvantaged groups.

Alongside teaching, the NES must place much greater importance on pastoral, counselling and support services to secure long term positive outcomes for learners most in need of support. These services have been under-resourced, in turn leading to increased pressure on an already strained system. Teaching staff have been left to plug the gaps in support services which is not a sustainable solution.

A contributing factor to the increased demand for support services is the deterioration in young people's mental health. UCU believes that the current education system is in part responsible for creating the conditions under which young people are suffering. Increased testing, compulsory resits, the move away from course work to final examinations are all drivers of stress and anxiety (for students and staff). The principles of social inclusion and learning, not passing tests, should be central to education. An innovative curriculum that inspires young people to choose to learn and unleashes their talent and creativity offers greater accountability than a narrow curriculum imposed from the top down.

In implementing the NES, the autonomy of the devolved nations and regions must be respected and there has to be scope for governments and authorities to flex their offer to benefit their residents. However national government must work to eradicate inequalities between regions and nations of the UK so that learners are not disadvantaged on the basis of where they live.

## UCU recommendations

1. **A fully integrated national education service:** including all parts of the post-16 education sector: FE, HE, community learning, ESOL, and offender learning
2. **An end to compulsion in post-16 learning:** young people need to be inspired, not forced, to learn with an exciting, vibrant and innovative curriculum.
3. **A genuinely inclusive education system:** accessible, flexible and properly funded
4. **Collaboration, not competition:** remove marketisation from education
5. **An end to incorporation:** bring back democratic accountability in education
6. **Scrap high stakes accountability regimes:** Fair, proportionate accountability that reflects local context and involves trade unions
7. **Representative governing bodies:** required to elect staff and student governors
8. **Greater transparency on senior pay:** representation for staff and students on remuneration committees with leaders not able to sit on the committee
9. **Establish local/regional cross-sector education forums:** to map the education and training needs of the community
10. **Tackle the use of exploitative employment models:** so that staff are securely employed and empowered to hold management to account